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The Female Body as Text: The Bio politics of Female Genital Mutilation

Abstract : Female Genital Mutilation refers to the horrendous practice of mutilating a woman's genital parts in the name of culture, tradition and religion. This custom thought to be practised only in the African nations, is practised even in developing nations like India where girls are subjected to this humiliating and torturous practice. This paper titled “The Female Body as Text: The Bio-politics of Female Genital Mutilation” attempts to explore the bio-politics of a cultural ritual like Female Genital Mutilation. It is an attempt to analyse the practice of Female Genital Mutilation through the theoretical lens of bio power. The paper provides an overview of Michel Foucault’s theory of bio-power that forms the basis for this analysis. Bio power refers to the growing tendency of modern power relations to focus on the behaviour of individuals and biological phenomena of population rather than the individuals themselves, in order to subject, modify and direct people’s conduct according to a given system of norms. It then traces the history and cultural beliefs associated with the practice. The paper applies the Foucauldian concept of bio-power to explore the relationship between the patriarchal domination of women and the cultural practice of female circumcision. It argues that when viewed through the Foucauldian lens of bio power female circumcision reveals itself to be a form of surveillance rather than a cultural and religious ritual.

Keywords: bio power, culture, Female Circumcision, patriarchy, surveillance.

Female Genital Mutilation

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) better known as Female Circumcision is a practice that involves the partial or complete excision of the female genital organs in the name of culture, tradition and religion. It continues to haunt women all over the world, first world, second world and third world nations alike. It is based on the patriarchal principle that female genitalia have inbuilt defects that need to be repaired, and constitute a problem that requires to be managed (Braun and Kitzinger qtd in Rodriguez). Four types of Female Genital Mutilation have been identified -cliterodectomy, excision, infibulations, and other forms of vaginal mutilations out of which infibulation is the most widely practiced.

In Cliterodectomy, the clitoris is partially or completely excised off while infibulation refers to the practice of sewing up the vaginal orifice, leaving just a tiny hole for the passage of menstrual blood and urine, the third form involves the excision of the labial folds, i.e. the labial majora , while the fourth category includes practices like cauterization of the clitoris, cutting and tightening of the vagina (WHO). Female Circumcision is often performed upon women with the intent to purify them, i.e. remove the unclean parts of the body. It also owes its existence to the ‘vagina dentata’ myth that the vagina had teeth which would result in the emasculation or castration of men during sexual intercourse.

The earliest instance of female circumcision can be traced to ancient Greece, where upper class women subjected themselves to this practice to distinguish them from their lower class counterparts. In many societies, especially African communities, female circumcision is celebrated as a rite of passage that marks the initiation of young girls into womanhood.

Young girls are held down by two or three older women while the circumciser scrapes off flesh from between her legs. The labial folds are pinned together by sticks till it heals and the

vaginal orifice sewed up leaving only a tiny opening. In developed countries like the USA, it is medically performed as girls view it as a means to reconnect with their roots and traditional culture.

Advocates of this practice claim that Female Circumcision being an age old cultural as well a traditional practice, is a mark of cultural identity and is necessary to safeguard the chastity as well as the virginity of the female population. The harmful after-effects are often neglected or under estimated... The procedure often involves the use of unsterilized sharp objects like glass shards, rusted knives, broken bottle pieces and is often performed by quacks leaving the child vulnerable to life threatening illness including AIDS. These include blood poisoning, death due to haemorrhage, painful periods, urinary infections, urinary incontinence, blood poisoning, pelvic inflammation, painful intercourse, recurrent vaginal injuries in sexual acts due to the procedure.

Not only is woman denied the right over her own body, she is also prevented from exploring her own sexuality outside male gaze. She loses the basic human right to decide which of her body parts get to stay and which don't. FGM creates 'guinea pigs' out of women that are silenced for the convenience of the patriarchal society.

The practice has been met with criticism, from both feminists and human rights organizations with the United Nations Organization terming it a gross violation of women's human rights.

Biopower

The notion of bio power emerged around the eighteenth century with Foucault claiming that "all modern societies are bio political". Bio power according to Foucault is form of power which "regulates, administers and controls" the biological features of a population, rather than the individuals themselves. It is often preferred to other traditional forms of power as it

is a much more efficient way of exerting authority over a group of individuals, because it is subtle and operates without much violence.

Foucault puts forward the theory of bio-power in his College de France lecture “Society Must Be Defended” to explain the tendency of modern power structures to regulate a group of individuals through the regulation and modification of their biological features. The major works in which he propounded these concepts are Discipline and Punish (1975) College de France Lectures “Society Must Be defended” (2003) and History of Sexuality: An Introduction (1978). In these works, Foucault connects bio power with race, sexuality and techniques aiming to modify and control the population

Bio power which emerged in the eighteenth century, was a more sophisticated and subtle way of exerting control over a population, as compared to sovereign power. The emergence of bio power is accompanied by a shift in focus from the rights of the sovereign to norms of the society (Kristenson).

Unlike earlier and other forms of power which extended control over individuals, bio power reduces individuals to their biological features which then become the objects of control and regulation. Thus techniques of bio power prove effective in the regulation of a society, both at the individual as well as at the population level. The terms ‘bio power’ and ‘bio politics’ have been used interchangeably by Foucault, but later scholars have identified a subtle difference between the two.

the former is a form of power that is oriented towards human beings as living members of a species with certain biological characteristics ... (and) Bio politics then is a technology of power that consists in techniques... practices and procedures that are aimed at organizing, regulating and governing the

phenomena peculiar to life in the context of population (Foucault qtd in Kristenson)

According to Foucault, bio power operates predominantly in the realm of sexuality (History of Sexuality 145). On one hand, sexuality is the expression of a bodily behaviour thus becoming vulnerable to surveillance and discipline, on the other it is linked to the biological processes of a population because of the role it plays in reproduction. Thus sexuality assumes a privileged position, because of its effects are situated on the micro level of the body as well as on the macro level of the population. It functions as both the “stamp of individuality”, as well as the index of a society’s strength, revealing of both its political energy as well as its biological vigour” which is why sexuality has become the “theme of political operations, economic interventions. . . and ideological campaigns (Foucault 146).

The Bio politics of Female Circumcision

Bio power finds application in a wide variety of disciplines, ranging from Anthropology to Governmental Studies and includes race gender, law etc. Given that the main focus of bio power has been to invest in and manage life, the concepts of bio power are useful to feminists who wish to investigate into “the female body as site of operation and exercise of patriarchal power” (Rodriguez 11).

Female Circumcision is a practice that is being deployed by the patriarchal society under the facade of culture and religion to keep women in their place. It effectively combines the techniques of both Anato politics and Bio Politics where Anato politics is the set of diverse measures directed towards the individual body , with the aim of making it more useful, and ‘docile’, and bio politics includes all those techniques that are aimed at regulating and controlling the population (Foucault qtd in Kristenson). The anato political tools of Female Genital Mutilation include cliterodectomy, infibulations, excision and mutilation, whereas the power to inflict psychological trauma across generations and

create a population of women obedient to the patriarchal society is one of its strongest bio political measures.

It does make use of physical violence and bodily injuries, but the effect is largely due to the ideological repercussions it entails, mostly due to the effect it has on the psyche of the woman. Not only does a young girl have to face the trauma of being cut so early in life, the physical pain, the memory of the violence, the violation of her body and especially the betrayal she feels at the hands of those she trusted the most, all leave her scarred for life. For circumcised women, even ordinary natural bodily functions like menstruation, urination, love making, and child birth, become nightmarish ordeals and the expression of their sexuality becomes a tool to discipline and control their lives.

Bio political techniques unlike those of sovereign power follows Foucault's logic that where "power relations have an immediate hold upon it (the body); they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (Foucault Discipline and Punish 25). Female circumcision involves an elaborate ritual, where the girl is fussed over, forced into being circumcised, thereby initiated into attaining society's concept of a perfect female body. These techniques directed to the female bodies can be explained as violence, state apparatuses or ideologies but they are subtler, non-violent and more pervasive. The effects are manifold; they range from physical impairing to psychological scarring and in most cases, even death by bleeding. The effects are usually carried on to the next generation as well as children born to circumcised women are in the danger of being impaired from descent through the infibulated vaginal opening.

FGM has emerged as an effective bio political technique because of its impact on the female sexuality. Foucault argues that it is sexuality, more than anything else that allows the power- knowledge apparatus to intervene at both the individual and social level (History of Sexuality 36) it is usually practiced on girls who haven't reached puberty, and is considered as

the mark of inviolate virginity. Girls are circumcised to rein in their sexuality and to safeguard their virginity till marriage, and also to provide more pleasure to the male during penetrative sex. Moreover, the obligatory procedure promises young women, marriage, children and economic stability, which uncircumcised or un-infibulated women are never allowed to have. Women who fear for their daughter's future are coerced into subjecting their children to this inhumane practice, despite being victims themselves. Although it is practised as a religious ritual that initiated a girl into womanhood and wifehood, it is more is a form of surveillance that operates through the participation of women.

Bio power is preferred to other traditional forms of power, as it can be used to regulate society both at the individual as well as population level. Female Circumcision follows the logic of bio power that to govern population one needs other techniques than solely disciplinary techniques which focus on individuals. At the level of the body, Infibulation operates on the female body and converts it into an object of 'erotic utility', where the "worth of the body is determined by the capability of the vagina to receive and provide pleasure during penetration" (Rodriguez). It also strengthens patriarchal power relations as these modifications are done to satisfy the patriarchal ego. At the level of the population FGM creates it a new population of women who themselves have been intimidated and defined by the cultural and patriarchal norms and are forced to hand over the 'continuum of pain' to their female children. (Hasanthi 555)

The bio politics of cliterodectomy is visible in the patriarchal intent of 'refining woman'. Bio power is characterized by the fact that in that it reserves the power to do away with life it deems unfit to live. The very aim of cliterodectomy is to remove the clitoris-that patriarchy describes as "the seat of evil", "the masculine part of the female body", which has to be removed in order that a woman be made wholly feminine. Cliterodectomy caters to the

patriarchal demand for “anatomically correct female genitalia” in the process, weeding out homosexual and autoerotic tendencies in women (Iriguray)

Bio power operates best in a society where people are categorized into categories such as ‘normal’ or ‘deviant’ based on certain norms. In patriarchal societies especially where FGM is prevalent women are categorized as normal, or deviant based on whether they’ve been circumcised or not i.e. based on the “regularity or irregularity of their genital parts and FGM is employed as a bio political technique to regularize the deviant population, to ensure that the female genitals are cut to size. i.e. it allows women who do not belong to the normal population to obtain a clean and proper body...through corrective and augmentative procedures. (Rodriguez)

Conclusion

Foucault introduces bio-power and bio politics in the context of normalizing society and power over life. And although extensive research has been done on the topic of female circumcision denouncing the cultural aspect of FGM, it has not been convincing enough. Although the application of bio politics to the analysis of human life has always been criticized for not taking into account the cultural and religious specificities of whatever is being analysed, it is useful as an analytical concept to re-evaluate the relation between life and politics. When applied to the analysis of suppressive techniques like Female Genital Mutilation it exposes the hypocrisy of those who wield power through such acts and reveals Female Circumcision to be a surveillance mechanism that modifies, disciplines and regulates the biological features of the female population in order to control them and in turn safeguard the interests of the patriarchal society.

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